ALEX L. MERUK

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Alex L. Meruk

(1891 -)

In 1908, at the age of seventeen, Alex L. Meruk left his home and family in Hungary to come to the United States. Two years later, after working his way across the country, he came to Hawaii.

During the next fourteen years, Mr. Meruk was an overseer for Pioneer Mill Company, Kahuku Plantation Company, and Honolulu Plantation at Puuloa. While living at the plantation camp at Puukolii on Maui, he organized the first National Guard unit there and commanded a company of 140 men, mostly Filipinos and Portuguese.

In 1924, Mr. Meruk went into the merchandising business and became known as the Realsilk man to many Honolulu residents. He headed an average staff of thirty salespersons in the local office of the Realsilk Hosiery Company until his retirement in 1954. He later came out of retirement to work for the Better Business Bureau for four years.

In this interview, Mr. Meruk recounts his employment history and the interesting experiences encountered in connection with his work.

Lynda Mair, Interviewer

INTERVIEW WITH ALEX L. MERUK

At his Lahaina home, 171-A Waihikuli Road, Maui 96761

March 1972

A: Alex L. Meruk

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

M: Why don't you start off by telling me something about your family and how you happened to come to Hawaii?

A: Oh, I see, this is personal then.

M: Um hm.

A: I came to the Islands in 1910 at the age of nineteen.

M: You came by yourself?

A: Yes. Being a European, I traveled in the Mainland from 1908 to 1910 in different large cities. Finally I landed here in the Islands. I accepted a job with the sugar plantation at Lahaina, Maui.

M: Is this Pioneer Mill [Company]?

A: With Pioneer Mill as an overseer. Of course, during the years of 1910 to 1920, conditions were not too good in the Islands, especially financially. For an example . . .

M: Wait awhile. (recorder turned off and on again) It's doing fine. Go ahead.

A: For example, in 1910 the income was very limited. My job as an overseer on a plantation paid thirty dollars a month. Well, you can see for yourself that that wasn't sufficient money to live the way you would like to. You had to cut down considerably in many things that you were in need of, and your wife also, but we had to get along on that amount of money until I was able to better myself.

I did like the plantation work, but what I didn't like about it is I didn't see any possible chances [of advancement]. Especially at that time conditions were so different from today. For an example, I lived in a small

camp. The name was Puukolii. In that small camp we had thirteen different languages, different races: Japanese, Chinese; we had Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Spanish; we had Germans. I was the only Hungarian, I believe. We had some Polish people.

M: Hm. I didn't know there were Polish people here.

A: Now how we got along was most interesting: by a mutual language. Let's say, if you were hungry you pointed to your stomach and all you said was, "kau kau." Kau kau meant eat. Work meant hana hana. Up meant mauka; down, makai. Ocean was kai; mountain was mauka. That was the universal language in the camp and we understood each other.

The most interesting was on Sunday when these different races had their own temporary churches in their own homes. As you walked up and down the camp, you could see these little groups in different parts of the camp praying in their own different languages. But they all believed in one definite and positive Creator that was our God. Everyone believed in God and that's the wording we used instead of Lord or anything else: God in Heaven.

The work was not too . . .

M: Wait. Let me ask you, were these families that lived in the camp or were these single people?

A: Families. All these different families, oh yes. Some of those people had families, came from Japan with their families; some came from China; some came from Spain, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Germany, Poland.

M: How did you happen to come to the United States? You came from Hungary, right?

A: Yes. I left Hungary at the age of seventeen. I had just finished high school. We had visitors from New York City. My father's brother and his family came. A cousin of mine, about my age, he told me all about the beautiful United States. He told me about the Statue of Liberty, how it greets you when you come to this beautiful country, and he explained to me that the United [States] was just about the most wonderful place in the whole world. I believed him and, as I say, after I graduated from high school--about two days later--I left for the United States.

When I landed in New York City, I was on board and I looked over the sights. I saw the Statue of Liberty. I admired it--it was most wonderful--and I even made this statement to a person standing next to me: "I'm going to become a good American for the reason that the United

States accepted me. I can come over here and start a new life." There were others. There were hundreds of them from different parts of Europe--working people. Of course their statement was different. They said, "Oh, we'll make a few dollars and then we go home again." But I firmly believed what I'd heard from my cousin, that it is the most wonderful country.

So I landed in New York City and to my biggest surprise, that first evening I stood over there looking up to the great big buildings with three pennies in my pocket and [I was] a very hungry young man wondering, "What am I going to do next?" Well, it was hard. The hardest thing in life is when especially a young man at my age is hungry and has a good appetite and can't get no food because he didn't have no money. Well, I had a very sad experience. Discouraged, wondering, "How am I going to get out of this?

Well, finally I got a job. A department store advertised for an interpreter. I spoke seven European languages but I couldn't speak a word of English. But they wanted an interpreter, a person who will stand at the door and as people come in, they ask for certain merchandise, you point where to go to in all these different European languages. They dressed me up like a Christmas tree, like a general (laughter), and they even gave me a big cane in my hand to look like a very dignified person. So anyone came in, let's say in Hungarian he said, "I would like to buy some socks," so I had to point where to go.

Well, finally the week went by and I was very anxious to find out how much money are they going to pay me for that job I'm holding and I figured it was a very important job because of the different languages I had to use. Well, finally I get my envelope and it was three dollars in there for the whole week's work.

M: Three dollars?

A: Oh, in 1910, oh yes, that's all they paid. That was big money. Three dollars was big money. [It was 1908 when he arrived in New York City.] Well, I began to realize that I had to be very careful with that money because I had to pay my rent, my food seven days a week, a little laundry, which of course most of it I done myself, and streetcars. I walked to work every morning and walked home at night. Well, it was very discouraging at the beginning.

Finally one Saturday, next door to that big store I worked, there was a sign: UTENSILS 50¢ a whole set. Well, curiosity; I went in there and looked at it and it was on a cardboard--all the kitchen utensils, like a screwdriver and a bottle opener and all kinds of little gadgets. So the man came up to me and he says, "Are you interested?" I said, "Well, I just wanted to see what it's all about."

He said, "Look, it costs you twenty-five cents for one of those cardboards. You sell it for fifty cents, you make a profit of twenty-five cents. Now, I give you a dozen for three dollars. You go out and sell it. You're going to make six dollars; you're going to make three dollars [for yourself]."

So I begin to figure. Now I'm working the whole week for three dollars and here I can make every day three dollars. That would give me six times more as much as I had made. So I gave him my three dollars. I completely forgot about my landlady. She's waiting for me every Saturday evening for the dollar, you know--the rental. (chuckles) I bought that. I gave him my three dollars thinking, "Well, tomorrow I'm going out to sell and I'm going to make three dollars. It's going to give me six dollars and I'm going to tell my landlady that I didn't get paid."

So when I got there, sure enough she was waiting there for her dollar and I told her I'm sorry, I didn't get paid. I wouldn't get paid till Monday. So I went to sleep that evening without having anything to eat. I couldn't sleep all night long for thinking about getting rid of it now, you know; how I'm going to sell it.

Finally the morning came and I was out selling them. Nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. I hadn't sold one. Finally I got into a place with a lot of Hungarian people. Especially there was an old fellow with a long pipe in his mouth sitting there. I went up to him and I told him. Well, he couldn't understand me. He said, "Can't you speak Hungarian?" and I said yes. (both chuckle) So I told him that I have these utensils and I'd like to [sell them]. "Oh, let me look at it." He looked at it very careful [and said], "All right, just a minute." And he began to call a bunch of ladies by their first names, like Mary, Susie and all that. You know, they all came and he says, "Say, this young fellow has something good to sell." And in five minutes I sold the whole thing.

M: Oh, for heaven's sake.

A: Now I went and I had something to eat, you know. Evening came. Finally I went to bed and I couldn't sleep again, wondering now, "If I'm able to make three dollars in one day, imagine, in ten days I'm going to have thirty dollars; in twenty days I'm going to have sixty dollars; in one month, ninety dollars!" I just couldn't sleep and I was so nervous, you know. (Lynda laughs) So next morning when I got up, I went back to the same place where I bought those things and they were out of business already. So I had to go back and work for three dollars a week. (laughter)

M: Oh no!

A: Anyway, I got different jobs, not much better financially but different jobs, and finally I left New York City on foot. I traveled to nearby little towns and as I went along there were little farms--farm places. At one place there was a sign: MAN WANTED FOR THREE DAYS. So I went in there and I didn't even see a cow. I didn't know how a cow looked like or a horse. I went in there. I told them, "I'm looking for a job. You got anything for me to do?" They told me to come in. I was so hungry and instead of giving me something to eat, they took me in a stable with a pitchfork to pick all that manure and throw it outside [through] a window-like out in a field, and then I had to take it in the field to some vegetables growing there. You know, throw it in there. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know how to handle that fork. He had to come and show me how to grab it, you know, and how to pitchfork it out.

Anyway, that evening the farmer told his wife that the food I'm getting I don't deserve because I didn't work hard enough for that little food they give me. I understood the language, you know, and that night I made up my mind. I says, "I'm going to go out tomorrow and do the best I know how," but when I got out there I realized I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know how to get started, you see. I did work hard, but no system. I didn't know anything about it; he had to show me everything.

Well, a couple of days went by and the third day came along. Finally they told me, "Now this is Thursday. Why don't you stay till Monday morning?" Evidently they liked me and they sympathized with me. So finally Monday morning came and the lady gave me a little packet with some sandwiches to take along with me. I was looking for him because I expected a little money for my work. He was nowhere. (laughter)

So I walked out and you know those farmers, they had mailboxes a little distance away from the house on the road. So I went out there. There he was waiting for me. In a little Bull Durham bag he had nickels, dimes, quarters all tied up. He gave it to me. Evidently he didn't want his wife to see it. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You're a good boy, Alex. Good luck to you and take good care of yourself." At least I had a little money to keep going.

Well, I did go to Harrisburg, finally to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and I got a job over there in a restaurant. I worked a little while until I had enough money to keep going. I went to Chicago, just kept on going, traveled up until I was able to come to the Islands over here.

M: When you came to Honolulu, what did you do at first?

A: Well, first I began to sell sewing machines.

M: Oh really?

A: Singer sewing machines. Well, it wasn't too good because at that time they only sold to white people. They didn't sell to Orientals in those days.

M: Why?

A: I don't know. They wouldn't do business with Orientals unless they paid cash. Well, they didn't have cash those days.

Then we got acquainted and the next thing we decided to come on a plantation to work. We came up here [to Maui] and we got a job at Puukolii, a little distance from here, and I was there working for them till 1908. In 1908 I . . . (Mrs. Meruk says, "No, how could that be? We came up in 1914. How could you have worked until 1908?") Oh yes. Yes, 1918. I beg your pardon. Yeh, 1918, that's right. Then we left [Lahaina], back for Honolulu. I accumulated enough money to go into a pig ranch, wasn't it, hm? Unfortunately, it didn't turn out good and in a very short time I was broke again. (Lynda laughs) Then I went to Kahuku, didn't I? I got a job at Kahuku with the much better pay of seventy-five dollars a month. That was big money those days.

But before I go any further, I organized the first National Guard up in Puukolii with Filipinos and Portuguese. I had a company of a hundred and forty men. I was in charge; I was their captain. I got my diploma in 1916.

M: Oh, you mean you had a course in that?

A: Oh, we had to pass an examination. Yes, oh yes. Very interesting because we had an old headquarters here for the National Guard in Lahaina and I had to come down on a Sunday morning to take my examination. I took my examination for lieutenant, but after I got my diploma I was a captain.

Most interesting. That morning when the colonel from Honolulu who gave us our sealed envelopes with all the questionaries--I got one and everybody [did]--we were so far apart, the next person from me was about ten feet away. We couldn't communicate and I wasn't good in English yet, you know. I had a hard time even to understand what the writing and those orders were. For instance, right face or left face, but I didn't know really what it meant. So the colonel came up to me about eleven o'clock and he asked me, "Well, how are you getting along?" (to his wife)

Mary. (Mrs. Meruk says, "Yes, I'm going to take her down.") She's going to have little ones.

M: Yeh.

A: I told him, I says, "Colonel, I'm sorry but . . .

M: She sure is pregnant.

A: Yeh. "I don't understand. I don't understand it." I told him I'm a European. "Oh, just keep going, keep going." Six o'clock that evening he came back to me and he says, "Well, how are you getting along?" I said . . .

M: You were there all day?

A: Yes. I said, "Same as this morning. I don't understand it." Oh, most of them already left, you know. There was only a couple or three left. Finally he kept us there till seven o'clock and he came up to me, says, "Well now, let me see your paper." Well, there was nothing I could put down; nothing, because I couldn't. He took my paper. He says, "Just don't worry," and a couple or three months later I got a diploma that big. I got it hanging down in my office. (laughter) I was made captain; not lieutenant but a captain, mind you. Of course I was very, very good in drilling. I know how to drill and I had a very fine company up in Puukolii.

M: And you recruited the people and all that?

A: I did. I did all that work over there, but mostly Filipinos. I got some pictures over here. Sad-looking bunch. (Lynda laughs) Well anyway, in 1918 we left. I got into that pig business, as I told you.

M: Whereabouts?

A: In Honolulu, up Diamond Head, but I lost it and I got a job in Kahuku--a much better job, better pay, a very beautiful home. Let me see now. How was it now? I think it was 1922 when I left Kahuku and I begin to work for Honolulu Plantation at Puuloa. I worked another two years there and I didn't care much about it. By that time I realized that plantation is no life for me.

M: Were you still working as an overseer?

A: How's that?

M: Were you an overseer at the other plantations?

A: Yeh, yeh. I was a section boss in Puuloa at Honolulu Plantation. So I saved enough money to buy a home. At that time, most amazing: a half an acre fee-simple ground; a home on it, not too good, but I paid $1900 for it. A half an acre and a good home--nothing good-looking at all but it was a nice home--$1900.

M: Where was this?

A: In Honolulu, in Kalihi. And I was a homeowner. I was really very proud of the fact that I owned my home now. We furnished it nicely. And then I went out looking for a job and I decided to buy merchandise such as socks, shirts, undergarments for men.

M: Oh, you're the Realsilk man!

A: Yes.

M: Donald [Cushnie Mair] told me about that, yeah. (laughs)

A: That was later. And I begin to sell from camp to camp but it wasn't good enough.

M: You mean you went around to the different plantations and sold?

A: Yes, just kept on selling on the plantations but it wasn't too good. I made some money out of it but not enough, so I decided to buy a different kind of merchandise, again kitchenware--mostly kitchenware--and I went up to Hawaii thinking that I'm able to get business much faster than here in Honolulu. When I got up to Hawaii I realized that transportation was very poor. I had to just go on foot from place to place and that was hard.

Now, one particular morning I left Hilo. I went to one of the plantations, which was about forty miles away from Hilo, on foot. Occasionally the milkman would pick me up and very, very little rides I did get, but I got to that plantation camp and I begin to sell. I made six dollars that day. I was through and I was on my way back to Hilo that evening and I hit Hilo at twelve o'clock at midnight. I was ready to move to a hotel, but then I realized it was going to be about a dollar or a dollar and a half. It was too expensive for me, making only six dollars and it maybe has to last me two or three days, so I sat down on a step and I slept over there till six o'clock the next morning to save that amount of money.

Well anyway, I stayed in Hilo a couple of weeks but it wasn't good enough because the expense was too high; I couldn't afford it. And I began to realize that not get-

ting enough sleep at night and I have to work the whole day, I won't be able to keep it up.

So I went back to Honolulu and there was an ad in the newspaper. No, a fellow came to our home, a Hawaiian fellow, with a sample case and he told me that he got the best socks on the market--Realsilk, the best socks ever came to the Islands. Well, I told him, "How much?" "Oh, a dollar a pair." I can't afford it; it's impossible. Ten or fifteen cents, but not a dollar for a pair of socks. I laughed at him. He said, "But look, it is the best." He tried his very best but I couldn't afford it.

Finally he says to me, "Why don't you go up and work for that company?" I says, "I'd like to." He give me the address, I went up there and the manager told me, "I'm sorry but we haven't got a vacancy." I said, "Have you got anybody out in the country?" He said, "Oh no, we don't send nobody out there; no business over there." I said to him, "You mean to tell me Puuloa where I work, Aiea, Waipahu--you mean you have nobody out there?" He said, "No, we did have but they couldn't make it." I said, "Well, if you give me a sample case and give me my training, that's the territory I want." He couldn't see it my way, but finally he gave in.

I got training for six days. On the seventh day, which was on Saturday, he told me, "Now go ahead." So I went out to Puuloa and there was a little station over there. A colored man, they called him the Mayor of Puuloa. He was a six-footer. He used to be a railroad conductor, you know; one of those big Yankee coal-black guys. You maybe have heard of or seen them.

M: Um hm.

A: I knew him so well. His name was Sam and when I came he says to me, "Well, Mr. Meruk, what are you doing now?" I said, "Oh, I'm selling the best socks in America." "Well," he says, "I need some but I cannot get the heavy socks I need because I'm very cold at my feet." I said, "Well, I can fix it." I showed him my heaviest hose. "Oh, that's not heavy enough." I said, "What size do you wear?" He said, "Twelve." I said, "Sam, I'm going to tell you something. You buy one dozen size twelve and one dozen twelve and a half. Put one sock on, the size twelve, and put the twelve and a half over it and you're going to get the hottest, warmest socks you ever had in your life." (laughter) And he accepted it and he ordered from me one dozen each. Well, eighteen and eighteen is thirty-six dollars. [Twenty-four pairs at $1.50 each] I made six dollars, mind you, right there. Then he says to me, "Have you got any white shirts with . . . "

END OF SIDE 1/1ST TAPE

. . . a good proposition because I figured I had enough to retire. By that time, of course, I bought a home up in Nuuanu. It cost me $42,500 cash. I lived opposite the [Oahu] Country Club. It was a concrete home, a beautiful home. Then this happened and I begin to realize that I hadn't got enough money. I had some stock, but not enough, so I had to go out and work a little bit longer. So then I took up the Better Business Bureau and I worked for them for the next four years, at which time I realized that I had sufficient money to retire now. Then I made up my mind to sell my place in Honolulu and come up to Maui.

I bought a very beautiful home down below on Front Street [in Lahaina] but it was too hot, so I sold that at a very nice profit and I built this home over here. I bought one up in Kula too. When it gets too hot, which it does quite often, then I go up there for a little while.

Now I'm eighty-one years old. I worked hard in my life. I've done a lot of charitable work. I know that I have done the right thing by my fellow man. I know that. Today, I feel that I have done my job. I'm still doing a lot of charitable work but I want to call it final as far as my activities because a person when he gets up to this age, his thinking capacity and everything in general is limited. So I would like very much from now on to enjoy myself in the quiet of this beautiful home, beautiful view as you look out there: the ocean.

M: Yes.

A: There is Molokai. There is Lanai on that side. The whales are coming through here and beautiful boats back and forth. It is really something to live up here and I'm very happy and satisfied that I came to the Islands of Hawaii, to this estate. I'm very happy that I have made so many good wonderful friends.

M: Tell me about some of your experiences selling.

A: How's that?

M: Tell me about some of the experiences you had selling.

A: Oh, if you hold it for a minute, I'll be right back.

M: Okay. (recorder turned off and on again)

A: You take, in selling, you have to build up your merchandise. Of course the Realsilk merchandise has been the finest. There's no doubt about it. But you have to build

it up to a point, when you get into a home, you have a genuine interesting story. You have to get away from your merchandise just for seconds, you know, to attract their attention. You have to connect something like the Statue of Liberty. Now the Statue of Liberty has got nothing to do with your merchandise, but if you believe in that wonderful statue, it's there for one purpose: liberty. It is the finest; it is the grandest; it is a most wonderful piece of object. Well now, I want you to know that the Realsilk Hosiery Company made a pair of socks that cannot be duplicated by anybody else. We have the patent; we have the rights to manufacture the finest socks in this world, bar none. Now, when you buy a pair of socks from me, or a pair of ladies' stockings, you are buying the finest because it will outlast anything you've ever, ever bought.

All right. I have heard it many a time as I go from door to door: "Oh, I can buy for my husband a pair of socks for twenty-five cents." I says, "Well, I can tell you where you can get one for ten cents, but if that's all you want, that's not merchandising." I said, "You want to get a pair of socks for your husband that will last at least a year. Now if you spent twenty-five cents for a pair of socks, it will last you only one month or a month and a half. You got to replace it six times [in a year]. Six times twenty-five cents is a dollar and a half. Now I can assure you that my socks will outlast any other socks on the market. And furthermore, if anything goes wrong with that sock, it's not your fault. It is the socks' fault; you're going to get a new pair." We done that over and over again.

M: Hmm.

A: Same with the ladies' stockings. "If you're not satisfied, let me know. I'll check. I'll come and see it. I know if it's your fault or not. You're going to get a new one. If I accept it, you're going to get a new one and I'm telling you, ninety out of a hundred receive a new piece of merchandise from us. We stand, we guarantee, we stand behind our merchandise.

Now I can go out on a very beautiful morning. Let's say a summer morning, I leave my office at nine o'clock in the morning and I go out to Waialua and that's a long distance. And I'll be back about five o'clock and I have about thirty, forty dollars in my pocket. I made good money because the people are going to buy. They know. They know that when I come in there I'm going to sell them the best. No one else can sell them anything better than I. I made this statement over and over again, that God has not allowed anyone to do and make a better piece of

merchandise than the Realsilk. I made that statement over and over again because I believed in that. I would actually stake my life against the merchandise that Realsilk has manufactured. Well, here. Would you believe that this is a 1953 [pair of socks] when I bought it maybe 1950 (Lynda laughs)? Here it is, look! Look!

M: And it's still going strong? My gosh!

A: Is there any hole or anything? Here you are. Now anybody would be proud to sell a piece of merchandise like that. You can't go wrong. It's good.

So I had my salespeople. We had our meetings. Imagine the same twenty, thirty or forty people--sometime we had more or less--who have worked together for years and years. My bookkeeper was with me thirty years. Some of my salespeople were with me for thirty years; worked with me because I suggested to them: "It's not the money that you are making. You're making it. How much are you able to save from that money? That's the most important thing. Are you going out every morning, make a few dollars and you spend it? Put some of it away. Now, I want to see your bank book, otherwise you can't work for me. You've got to save money because I want you to be independent. You leave in the morning. You don't have to worry about: am I going to be able to pay my rent or, you know, other bills? You have it. You've paid. You've got that money waiting for a time to pay it out because you made it already. You have it saved. You have no worries in the morning and it's important to have a clear mind. If you haven't got a clear mind, how can you sell?"

Just imagine, I go out with all this. "Oh, I got to pay rent. I got to buy this. Oh, what I going do?" How can I sell? I haven't got a clear mind. But if I can go out and everything is behind me, everything is clean in front of you. "Get in there and entertain your customers. Give them that five minutes or ten minutes to make it really interesting for them." And believe me, I did. When they saw me coming, they opened the door for me. I didn't have to knock (laughter) because the door was opened already for me because they knew they were going to have a fifteen, twenty minutes interesting time. I got in with the finest people--the wealthiest and the finest people in the Hawaiian Islands, and they bought from me.

You know, I had the nerve one time. . . . A fellow who came over here from the Mainland, he sold twenty-dollar shirts. I went up to that manager on a plantation [who had bought one]. I told him, "You mean to tell me you buy?" "Well," he said, "that's the finest shirt on the market." I said, "All right. Mine is four dollars. When you go on the race track, how many horses are there?

Only one horse? No. Well, I put mine in there too. See which one is a better horse, the twenty dollar or the four dollar." And they bought from me. They kept on buying then because they realized that they saved sixteen dollars on a shirt. Sure, they could afford twenty dollars. Naturally they can. But I proved to them that my shirt was just as good and better.

You know, I was proud of the fact that we had a thirty-five-[inch] sleeve length because very few stores had it. All right. And one year after, you ask a fellow, "What is the length of your sleeve yet?" "Thirty-five." It didn't shrink. It was still thirty-five.

Socks--ladies' stockings, size eight. You go to a store, you cannot buy size-eight ladies' hose. We had it. Size-nine men's socks. You ever heard of anything like it? We had it. Thirteen? There was a man here. Remember old Freeland?

M: Um hm.

A: Old Man Freeland, he couldn't buy a sock anywhere. I came along. He said, "Mr. Meruk, if you can give me a size thirteen . . ." "Thirteen and a half. (laughter) I got it." He was a life customer.

Now, the last convention I had attended with the Realsilk Hosiery Company, and that was in San Francisco, we had the first meeting at the Fairmont Hotel at eight o'clock that evening and I was the first speaker. We had a group: the president of the company, the vice-president, the regional manager, and they had about forty-some-odd managers sitting at that dinner table and they listened when I spoke. Then I was asked, "Mr. Meruk, will you please get up and tell us?" And you know what I told them? "If I had to do my life all over again, I wouldn't want it any better." Isn't that a good statement, for a bunch of salespeople and managers to hear that? I told them, "Now I'm selling three generations today." At that time I had especially one old-timer. He's about ninety-nine now, [William H.] Borthwick. He was my customer, his son was my customer, and his son was my customer. Three generations.

M: Wow.

A: And I said, "If I would stay longer in the business I would have the fourth one too." They were so satisfied. Now that's how I created my business in the Islands. I had people (chuckles), a bunch of names here: so-and-so buys from me; the whole three generation buys from me. Satisfied? Not one complaint ever. If something is wrong, they call me up. I change it for them right away. You

know, I take interest. It's an adjustment? Didn't make any difference to me, sale or adjustment, but I knew how much I'm going to make. I knew how much my salespeople were going to make. We knew ahead of time. We were able to figure ahead of time because we had satisfied customers, you know, and we had so many. If you asked us, "Well, how many steady customers have you?" "Oh, I got about three hundred and fifty." Well, you figured out the money they spent at three dollars a year, hmm? You've got it. We know how much we're going to make ahead of time.

Then we always tried to get some new ones. These old customers would give us new ones. Schofield Barracks--they wouldn't allow anyone to go in there. Why did they allow me? The general's wife. It was because of her. She said, "That's the best merchandise and I recommend that to you ladies over here," and I had a right of way to come to Schofield and sell. (Lynda laughs) So that's how we done business.

But now I would like to say one thing, and if the salespeople would do it today. And this is it: every time they had a meeting, the first thing I told them about was "Your honesty to your customers, your sincerity, your truthfulness. And it has a lot to do with your selling. It is the day you put that--don't give them or sell them anything that you don't know anything about. You got to know it. <u>You</u> got to know first." If you do that today as we did years ago, business conditions can't go wrong.

I wouldn't want to be in business today; what I see, you know, the way things go. I wouldn't know how to go about it. I'll be honest about it because I still believe in that fairness, you know; honest, truthful sales. You didn't have to worry. "Well, did I say something that is not right?" You didn't have to because it came out without even thinking because you told the truth. You could not elevate your merchandise. You could not speak higher about your merchandise, because it <u>was</u> so. You were wearing it yourself.

Now today so many things go on, mostly unpleasantness. Now how do we old-timers look at it? We know the young generation. They don't know any better. They accept anything, you know, long as it's good, long as it sounds good and fast, and like dancing and singing and hollering and yelling. They like it. Okay. But we don't. We put a line here and we put a line over there now because we are old. We went through those things, not once; twice, three times. We know all about it. We know what's coming as soon as they begin.

M: Right, yeh.

A: Right?

M: Uh huh.

A: But still, if an elderly person has common sense, that's the most important thing that they don't teach you today--common sense. If you have common sense, you don't interfere with their activities. They like it; let them have it. They have to learn by themselves if it's right or wrong. You can tell them a hundred times over again it's no good or it's wrong. It doesn't mean nothing to them because they live in a different world entirely.

You, with your experience, you go and tell them something. A young kid over there who doesn't know nothing go tell them something. They'll listen to him because he's more interesting. He's fast. This old man, he's too slow. (chuckles) You know. That's it. But the truth is God in Heaven has given us something that very few people know up until you get to be an old man: that you can look at it and you know it's wrong, but still, it's none of your business. Let them go ahead. Let them go to it. They have to learn by themselves. They will find out if it's wrong or right.

M: Yeh, right.

A: You know, we are in a position to analyze, hm? I mean if you still got common sense in your head. Well, you analyze it, you look at it, you know it's wrong. You won't tell them because you know it won't do you no good to tell them. Long as you don't do it, leave it alone, see?

M: Yeh, yeh. Right. Can you remember any other stories about the early days?

A: Well, yes, especially over here. When I worked on the plantation, one Sunday morning the manager called me up. I was up in Puukolii. He called me up that there's a captain from a sailing vessel [here]--in those days they came here with lumber and such to Lahaina--and he knew that there was a luau a little ways out and if I would take this sailing captain out to that luau. He sent me some cigars so I can treat this old captain and we went out there. Anyway, I saw it; he didn't but I was looking for it. There was a pig all right, and there was a dog. They had them both for that luau, you know. (Lynda laughs) I won't eat anyway. So while they were eating, and I was sitting next to the captain, he'd eat and say, "Oh, this is good." (chuckles) He liked it. Old Hawaiian fellow, he went down like this. (demonstrates and barks; Lynda laughs) The old captain says to me, "What's the matter with him?" "Oh, he's just playing. They always do that." I couldn't tell him that he imitates a dog, the [luau] dog.

So, we had a lot of interesting times over here. They haven't got it today, but those days when the harvesting season was over on a plantation, then the plantation had a big blowout. They killed cattle and they sent everybody some free meat. They made it very interesting for the people. Well, we're through cutting cane, harvesting all through, now we're going to have a good time. And everybody enjoyed themselves.

Now, if they had a baseball [game], they send the trucks over there to pick up these people, take them down to the baseball game. Free everything. Free transportation. People got together. They used to sing. We used to get up on a stage and entertain the people. I used to get up there and sing too.

Now, the Filipinos in my National Guard, some of them could not speak English and I always helped them out. For instance, it was the Fourth of July and I remember that so well. We built a bridge in the park over there at Puukolii and when it got dark I gave each of my soldiers a half a dozen blank ammunition to put in their guns. I divided them. One was the enemy and the bridge was supposed to be blowed up. Everything was dark. Of course I had a whistle and they listened to that because I trained them. One whistle, then the right flank begins to move toward the bridge to take the bridge over. Two whistles. Slowly, then all of a sudden, boom! A little dynamite blew it up and they begin to fire everybody's six-six [six shooters]. (laughter) The whole camp was excited. But we done those things.

One time the general came up to Puukolii and I had a guard outside the gate. When the general and his staff came up, this Filipino guard [presented arms]. The general was very much surprised that such a thing we do, you know; honor the general coming in and present arms. But when he spoke to the Filipino, he couldn't talk. (laughter) He knew how to go through it, but he couldn't talk. But he was really delighted that we made those accomplishments there. Real military, you know. Of course I had sergeants who could speak nicely, and I had the right guy especially, my first sergeant. He was Portuguese. He could speak very nicely. I was lucky I had a bugler. Remember that bugler from the constabulary there? Beautiful, just beautiful, the way he blow that taps, you know.

Well, we had to entertain ourselves those days. We didn't have anything. (train whistle blows) Very few people had phonographs. We had one up there. Many times the Filipinos came and serenaded us at night, but that's about all the entertainment. Well, we occasionally had moving pictures. That's about all. That was the life. Very quiet. (sound of train passing by)

M: Um hm. Is that the Kaanapali train?

A: Oh yes! Have you seen it already?

M: No, I'd like to see it.

A: Well, then. It's going by. (recorder turned off and on again) One time they grabbed me and tied me up.

M: Oh really?

A: Yes.

M: And then what happened? They just didn't want you around, so they tied you up?

A: No. They just tie you up and a big man come along and they left you. (microphone noises) By that time they had gone already. I'm telling you it was really tough, and little money you get, you know.

I'll never forget the first raise I got from thirty dollars to forty-three. I was building a bridge, a big trestle, for the pineapple company. That was the funniest thing. The trestle, that bridge, was about a hundred feet from the ground. We built it from both sides, you know. Finally we got it closed and the first car. . . . In those days the brake was a handbrake. So the first car was coming down a very small grade, you know, coming down slowly and this fellow was standing over there and working that brake. Suddenly the car tipped over. But you know what, I could not understand because the weight--that little cane car should have come down first and the man on top; but no, just the opposite. The man came down first and the car crushed him. See, a hundred feet.

M: Yeh.

A: So, there you are. Oh, that instance when this happened, we all run down to try to help that person.

M: Uh huh. He wasn't killed? (clatter of dishes)

A: Yeh, he was killed. And the manager, Weinzheimer, he came and one of the directors came to check on that. So, they just got there. 'Course they're used to that, evidently. The manager says to me, "Well, how did it happen?" "I don't know. Everything was complete and this was the first car coming across to see if our grade is correct." We give it just a very small percentage, you know. He said, "He handled it very nice. Suddenly, came off--the car and him."

By that time the director came over and I don't know him. I didn't know him at all. "Well," he says, "those things happen. It's not your fault." I thought to myself, "My fault? I got nothing to do with it!" And the manager says to me, "Oh, Mr. Meruk, you're going to get a little raise in your next envelope." So payday came, I got ten dollar raise. (chuckles)

M: You got a raise after the car had the accident.

A: Uh huh.

END OF SIDE 2/1ST TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

Re-transcribed and edited by Katherine B. Allen

Subject Index

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In May 1971, the Watumull Foundation initiated an Oral History Project.

The project was formally begun on June 24, 1971 when Katherine B. Allen was selected to interview kamaainas and longtime residents of Hawaii in order to preserve their experiences and knowledge. In July, Lynda Mair joined the staff as an interviewer.

During the next seventeen months, eighty-eight persons were interviewed. Most of these taped oral histories were transcribed by November 30, 1972.

Then the project was suspended indefinitely due to the retirement of the foundation's chairman, Ellen Jensen Watumull.

In February 1979, the project was reactivated and Miss Allen was recalled as director and editor.

Three sets of the final transcripts, typed on acid-free Permalife Bond paper, have been deposited respectively in the Archives of Hawaii, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii, and the Cooke Library at Punahou School.